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## WHO WAS THE GREEN KNIGHT?

By A. H. KRAPPE

IN his *Study of Gawain and the Green Knight*,<sup>1</sup> which must ever remain a classic in the learned literature of twentieth-century America (not too rich, alas, in classics of this type), George Lyman Kittredge may be said to have solved the problem of the origin of this gem of mediaeval poetry, at least so far as it is a problem of literary history. The ME poem is the English version of a lost French composition<sup>2</sup> of which a number of parallel texts exist on the continent. It was based upon a Celtic story the oldest known variants of which are found in Ireland. With these findings the task of the historian of literature is properly terminated, while that of the folklorist and the student of the ancient Celtic religion may be considered to set in at this very point.

The central figure of the story, the person who by his appearance and challenge sets the action in motion, is clearly a supernatural being, inasmuch as only such an one can accomplish the feat of quietly picking up his head, after it had been struck down, and of calmly walking away with it, holding it in his hand

a guisa di lanterna.

What is more, he is from the beginning recognized as a supernatural, an uncanny being by the assembly; else the hesitation of the heroes to accept the challenge would be difficult to understand.

In the study of the technique of folk-tales *per se* the peculiar character of the supernatural agent is of relatively little importance. It matters little, for example, whether the trusty helper occurring in many story types is a fairy, the Virgin Mary, or an animal. Similarly, for the enjoyment of our story the true nature of the Green Knight is at bottom inconsequential; it is sufficient that he be able to accomplish the feat referred to. Since, however, the demonology of folk-tales is to a considerable extent borrowed from the ancient pagan religions or, sometimes, from mediaeval Catholicism, a study of this demonology may occasionally throw interesting light on forgotten cults. To illustrate the point, suffice it to refer the reader to the numerous references, in Jacob Grimm's *Teutonic Mythology*, to the *Household Tales* collected by himself and his brother Wilhelm many years previously. Thus the question: Who was the Green Knight? has an interest transcending the boundaries of mediaeval literary history.

The chief characteristic of the unknown knight who enters the hall is the green color, which is by no means confined to his clothing but extends to his skin, hair, beard, and eye-brows. His horse is also green, as is, of course, the bob of holly which he holds in his hand. The theories of Wilhelm Mannhardt and Sir James G. Frazer holding practically unlimited sway in the years immediately preceding and following the European War, it was in a measure inevitable that, on the

<sup>1</sup> Cambridge, 1916.

<sup>2</sup> That the ME poem *in toto* should be the rendering of a French romance seems doubtful after the careful research of Fräulein E. v. Schaubert, *Englische Studien*, LVII (1923), 394-446. What has been taken from a French model is the theme of the challenge.

strength of this color, the Green Knight should have been acclaimed as a 'Vegetation Spirit.'

The first scholar boldly to embark upon an outright identification of the Green Knight with the 'vegetation demon' or the latter's human representative was E. K. Chambers. Said he: 'The green man of the peasantry, who dies and lives again, reappears as the Green Knight in one of the most famous divisions of Arthurian romance.'<sup>1</sup>

Much the same view was held by A. B. Cook, the learned author of *Zeus*, who saw in the Green Knight a figure closely related to the ancient Italic tree-god Virbius of Arician memories.<sup>2</sup> In the same strain George Henderson wrote in 1912:<sup>3</sup> 'In the Gadhelic *Feast of Bricriu* the incident parallel to that of *Sir Gawayne and the Grene Knyghte* exhibits the challenger as the human representative of the oak-tree: the hair, garment, beard and horse are green, and the hero carries a bough of holly.'

The objections brought forward by Mr Kittredge<sup>4</sup> are largely formal, being based upon the fact that the challenger of the Irish archetype is neither green nor in any way associated with trees and vegetation and that the green color is equally absent in the other extant parallel versions of the story. Thus the author is inclined to regard this feature as an innovation either of the English poet or of some French predecessor. The weak point of this position is, of course, that it rests upon an *argumentum ex silentio*. For it is at least equally probable that the English poem has preserved a feature suppressed by the others as unimportant or incomprehensible. It is, for example, quite certain that a rationalistic reworker should have suppressed the green color of the knight's hair, beard, and eye-brows and that he should have given him a horse more resembling, in appearance, the specimens of *Equus caballus* seen by him in battles and tournaments. Thus it will be well, at least for the present, to draw no further conclusion from the color of the knight's horse, accoutrement, and general appearance.<sup>5</sup>

According to the ME poem, the Green Knight, though splendidly attired, has no arm but a battle-axe. The Irish story of the *Champion's Bargain* lends him a less aristocratic appearance: In his left hand he holds a block which twenty yoke of oxen could barely have pulled, while his right hand wields an axe equally heavy and extremely sharp. In the French *Mule sanz Frein* and *Humbaut* he is a *vilain* of frightful appearance, who carries on his shoulder a great battle-axe (jusarme) or an ordinary axe. In the *Perlesvaus* he is a knight armed with a great axe, while in the *Livre de Caradoc* he wields a long sword. It is at once clear that we have here an ascending series, the poets tending more and more to elevate their hero to the level of the aristocracy. This explains entirely the aristocratic accoutrement of the challenger in the two last French versions. There can in fact be no reasonable doubt that in the archetype the challenger was a

<sup>1</sup> E. K. Chambers, *The Mediaeval Stage* (Oxford, 1925), I, 186. The first edition dates from 1903.

<sup>2</sup> *Folk-Lore*, xvii (1906), 340-341.

<sup>3</sup> *Miscellany presented to Kuno Meyer* (Halle, 1912), p. 26.

<sup>4</sup> *Op. cit.*, p. 199.

<sup>5</sup> A more recent article (*Modern Philology*, xxxiii, 351 *sqq.*), so far as it is not a mere rehashing of outworn and untenable arguments, attributes to the episode of *Perlesvaus* a value which, in the nature of things, it cannot claim, being manifestly late and highly rationalized.

commoner, a *vilain*, armed with an axe. If one were to venture a guess, on the strength of his appearance (leaving the question of his color completely aside), it would seem that he is either a wood-cutter<sup>1</sup> or else the honored member of a profession equally useful, though somewhat more important, in feudal society: the executioner. The story alone can decide this point and does decide it with a minimum of ambiguity; for while no mention whatever is made of tree-chopping, the grim business of the headsman is fully insisted upon, sometimes with details gruesome to the modern reader, though probably only mildly realistic for generations which witnessed the executions on Tower Hill as amusing spectacles. We thus draw the (provisional) conclusion that the Green Knight is a mediaeval precursor of *maître* Samson, wielding the rude axe or (in one more aristocratic text) the long sword of the headsman, with which noble and princely personages accused of 'high treason,' from the time of the early Plantagenets to that of James II, were expeditiously dispatched into a better world.

The Green Knight is, however, a very peculiar executioner: He gallantly suffers himself to be beheaded first, unfortunately, after having bound his victim to submit to a like operation at the end of a stipulated term, then picks up his head and walks off with it. It is thus clear that he is not an ordinary executioner but a supernatural, an immortal one, in fact, the only deathless executioner known, namely Death itself. Let us now see what other features of the story confirm this conclusion.

On reading the descriptions given in the various texts of the Challenger's appearance, one is struck by the insistence laid, in most of them, certainly in all those which have not undergone the gradual process of rationalization and adaptation referred to above, upon his ugliness, his untidiness, and his general slovenliness and squalor. Thus the Irish story of the *Champion's Bargain* represents him as a hideous giant, covered with an old hide next to his skin and a black tawny cloak about him, with fierce yellow eyes in his head, standing out as big as a cauldron that would hold a large ox. In the other Irish version, manifestly abridged, no description of the stranger's physical appearance is given, but his name speaks volumes: Uath mac Imomain 'Terror, the son of Great Fear.' In the *Mule sanz Frein* the challenger is a *vilain* emerging from a cellar or underground vault, black and frightful to behold, taller than St Marcel, i.e., obviously, a giant. In *Humbaut* he is a *vilain* tall and black, ugly and hideous. As a matter of fact, the *Livre de Caradoc* and the *Perlesvaus* are the only texts which have altered these *données*: the former has at least preserved the tall stature of the knight and his tawny steed (of which more anon). The *Perlesvaus* alone goes the full length of rationalization, converting the challenger into a handsome knight richly dressed. It is of course self-evident that this favorable exterior, which stands in glaring contrast to his sinister function, is due to an afterthought of the aristocratic author, writing for a refined public and hence intent upon banishing all that is rude and ugly from the world of his dreams.

Thus the question arises: Why should a vegetation demon be given such an unprepossessing appearance? We should look in vain for an answer from Mann-

<sup>1</sup> It is noteworthy that Kittredge thought of the same contingency; cp. p. 199 of his work.

hardt's May festivals. The Green George of the Slavonic, the *Maigraf* of the Teutonic countries have nothing ugly, certainly nothing terrible about them. They are human figures dressed in green, that is, covered with verdure. They are usually drenched with water (a well-known rain charm); they are occasionally beheaded in effigy; but they do not behead anybody nor threaten to do so. Thus the analogy sought for proves wholly illusory.

In thus emphasizing the dark colors predominant in the Irish and French texts, we do not wish to imply that the green color of the ME poem is necessarily an innovation, as Mr Kittredge seemed to think, though his *knighthood* certainly is. In fact, the green color is quite compatible with the slovenliness and squalor of the other texts, witness an Irish *märchen*, entitled *Lawn Dyarrig and the Knight of Terrible Valley*,<sup>1</sup> belonging to a type discussed elsewhere.<sup>2</sup> There the supernatural protagonist, called the *Green Knight* from Terrible Valley, is described as follows: '[His] head was out through his cap, [his] elbows and knees were out through his clothing, and [his] toes were out through his shoes.'

Granting the Irish provenance of the tale, we are naturally tempted to look for similar specimens of ugliness and squalor in Irish literature and folk-lore. Nor do we have to look far. In the well-known story of the *Pursuit of the Gilla Dacker*<sup>3</sup> there appears an ugly-looking giant with a large thick body, bloated and swollen out to a great size, with clumsy, crooked legs and broad flat feet turned inwards . . . He is fully armed, but all his weapons are rusty and soiled and slovenly looking. A broad shield, of a dirty, sooty color, rough and battered, hangs over his back . . . His horse is even larger in proportion than the giant himself and quite ugly. His great carcass is covered all over with tangled scraggy hair, of a sooty black; one can count his ribs and all the points of his big bones through his hide; his legs are crooked and knotty, his neck twisted, and for his jaws, they are so long and heavy that they make his head look twice too large for his body.

Now this *gilla*, a horrible giant, owner of a demonic horse, is, as has been shown elsewhere, none other than the god of Death, the Celtic Hades.<sup>4</sup> His horse corresponds to the steed of tawny color possessed by the challenger in the *Livre de Caradoc*, but also to the stallion Erion, the demonic horse of Adrastus, which disappears with its master near Colonos, the ancient dwelling of Demeter Erinyes and the Erinyes, to the horse of Charos, the god of death in the Neo-Hellenic ballads, to the *Ἰππος χλωρός* of Death in the *Apocalypse* (vi, 8), to the horse of Brimo, the Thracian goddess of death, and to quite a number of other horses of equally sinister meaning.<sup>5</sup> The ugly giant of our story, carrying (in the Irish text) a block and an axe, is thus clearly the Lord of Hades, the god of Death.

There is indeed no need to dwell upon the ghastly and terrifying aspect of the

<sup>1</sup> J. Curtin, *Hero-Tales of Ireland* (London, 1894), pp. 262 sqq.; A. P. Graves, *The Irish Fairy Book* (London, s.d.), pp. 181 sqq.    <sup>2</sup> *Zeitschrift für romanische Philologie*, LIV (1934), 73 sq.

<sup>3</sup> Curtin, *op. cit.*, pp. 514 sqq.; S. H. O'Grady, *Silva Gadelica* (London, 1892), I, 258-276; II, 292-311; P. W. Joyce, *Old Celtic Romances* (London, 1879), pp. 223-273; Graves, *op. cit.*, pp. 102-122.

<sup>4</sup> *Revue Celtique*, XLIX (1932), 96-108.

<sup>5</sup> Cp. L. Malten, 'Das Pferd im Totenglauben,' *Jahrbuch d. deutschen archäologischen Instituts*, XXIX (1914), 179-255; W. Steller, *Zeitschrift für Volkskunde*, II (1930), 61-71.

grim divinity all over the earth, nor upon the predominance of dark colors. Only two features would seem to deserve further discussion: the gigantic stature of Death and the slovenliness and squalor characterizing his outer appearance.

The Breton *Ankou* is generally described as driving a cart, the *Carric ann Ankou* and holding an iron whip in his hand. He is usually imagined as a giant, tall but lean, with long white hair, his head covered with a large felt hat. The horses which draw the cart are lean and emaciated, hardly able to stand on their legs. The cart is no better:

Elle avait pour fond quelques planches disjointes; deux claies branlantes lui servaient de rebords. Un homme de haute taille, un grand escogriffe aussi décharné que ses bêtes, conduisait ce piteux attelage . . . <sup>1</sup>

Nor are these fancies of recent origin, witness the appearance of the Morrigu, the Irish goddess of death, in the *Táin bó Cuailgne*, before Cuchulain's final combat and death:<sup>2</sup>

They heard the rattle of a chariot from the loamy district of Culgaire. They saw before them a chariot harnessed with a chestnut horse. The horse had but one leg, and the pole of the chariot passed through its body, so that the peg in front met the halter passing across its forehead. Within the chariot sat a woman, her eye-brows red, and a crimson mantle round her. Her mantle fell behind her between the wheels of the chariot, so that it swept along the ground. A big man went along beside the chariot. He also wore a coat of crimson, and on his back he carried a forked staff of hazelwood. . .

Of gigantic stature are the Neo-Hellenic Charos and the demons peopling the abode of Hell in the *Gesta Danorum* of Saxo Grammaticus<sup>3</sup> and in Dante's *Inferno*. The Old Norse Hel is the daughter of Loki and a giantess.<sup>4</sup> Equally terrible is the demon Ravana, a giant with ten necks and twenty arms, clearly a form of the dreaded Rudra, the ancient Hindoo divinity of death.<sup>5</sup> Another giant with essentially sinister functions — he has the evil eye — is Shiva, the third person of the Hindoo trinity, the god of destruction and death.

The mediaeval writers dwell with a good deal of insistence upon the squalor and filth of Hell. The account of Saxo Grammaticus<sup>6</sup> and the vivid descriptions of Dante's *Inferno*<sup>7</sup> are excellent examples, as are many of the less known visions of mediaeval literature.

There is one more feature in the Challenger's accoutrement deserving of note, to wit, his long (sometimes trailing) mantle or cloak: an old hide in the Irish text, a green mantle in the ME poem, a long ermine robe in the *Livre de Caradoc*, a *cote vermeille* (cp. the crimson mantle of the Irish Morrigu!) in *Perlesvaus*. One is immediately reminded of the obligatory mantle (black or red) of the mediaeval executioner, but also of the long black mantles worn by the undertaker's men in France and elsewhere. There is still more to this feature. Nehalennia, a Teutonic goddess of death, is covered with a long cloak with hood.

<sup>1</sup> Anatole Le Braz, *La Légende de la Mort chez les Bretons armoricains* (Paris, 1912), I, 104.

<sup>2</sup> Eleanor Hull, *The Cuchullin Saga in Irish Literature* (London, 1898), pp. 103–104.

<sup>3</sup> Ed. Holder, pp. 286 sqq.      <sup>4</sup> *Gylfag.*, c. xxxiv.      <sup>5</sup> *Revue Celtique*, XLVIII (1931), p. 102 sq.

<sup>6</sup> *Ed. cit.*, pp. 289 sqq.; 294.      <sup>7</sup> *Inferno*, VI, 7–12; VII, 103 sqq.; XII, 40; XVIII, 112 sqq., etc.

Woden-Othin is *Hackelberend*, 'wearer of a mantle.'<sup>1</sup> This long mantle conceals his protégé on the gruesome ride over land and sea.<sup>2</sup> The dwarfs, elves, and other chthonic beings wear long trailing cloaks to conceal their feet. The German poet Schiller follows the same tradition in his classical description of the Eumenides:

Ein schwarzer Mantel schlägt die Lenden,  
Sie schwingen in entfleischten Händen  
Der Fackel düsterrote Glut. . .

In short, the long trailing cloak or mantle hides chthonic beings, since they are by their very nature the 'hidden ones,' at the same time those who conceal in turn. Suffice it to recall *Καλυψώ*, 'she who conceals,' the Irish *Cailleach* from *caille* (<*pallium*), 'veil, hood,' the Norwegian *huldres*, who are the equivalent of the Latin *manes* and the Irish *síde*, and whose name simply means 'the hidden, the veiled,' i.e., the dead. Similarly, the word *döðöljur* of the Swedish Uppland dialect, meaning 'manes defunctorum,' is derived from the verb *dölja*, *dylja*, 'to hide, conceal';<sup>3</sup> finally, Hades is *ἀφιδης*, 'the Invisible.'

We are now prepared to discuss the true meaning of the green color of the Challenger in the ME poem, and it is well to point out once for all that this feature is by no means the exclusive property of vegetation demons.

Green is, first of all, the color of the Irish *síde*: 'Like the *feld elfen* of the Saxons, the usual dress of the Fairies is green,' says Scott, 'though, on the moors, they have been sometimes observed in heath-brown, or in weeds dyed with the stoneraw, or lichen.'<sup>4</sup> Virtually all the elfin folk in Britain and Ireland dress in green.<sup>5</sup> 'Wherever described in our balladry, female fairies are dressed in green.'<sup>6</sup> The reason for this peculiarity is not far to seek: The Celtic *síde* are the dead ancestors, as was pointed out long ago by the Scottish humanist Robert Kirk of Aberfoyle,<sup>7</sup> and green is the color of the dead and of death. For this reason the color is essentially unlucky. Thus we hear in the ballad of *Lord Thomas and Fair Annet* (73 B 20): 'I'll na put on the grisly black, nor yet the dowie green.' The superstition survives to the present day along the Border and in the western counties.<sup>8</sup> One of the ghost babes in a Motherwell copy of *The Cruel Mother* (20 H) is clad in green:

The neist o them was clad in green,  
To shew that death they had been in.<sup>9</sup>

<sup>1</sup> H. Güntert, *Kalypso* (Halle, 1919), pp. 54-57.

<sup>2</sup> Saxo Grammaticus, *Gesta Danorum*, ed. cit., p. 24.

<sup>3</sup> Jacob Grimm, *Deutsche Mythologie*, II<sup>4</sup>, 763.

<sup>4</sup> *Minstrelsy*, ed. Henderson, II, 354.

<sup>5</sup> W. Y. Evans Wentz, *The Fairy-Faith in Celtic Countries* (London, 1911), pp. 312-313; Th. Keightley, *The Fairy Mythology* (London, 1900), p. 290.

<sup>6</sup> L. C. Wimberly, *Folklore in the English and Scottish Ballads* (Chicago, 1928), p. 176.

<sup>7</sup> Cp. my *Science of Folk-Lore* (London, 1930), p. 88, where the whole question has been discussed. For Robert Kirk and his work, cp. *Mitteilungen der Schlesischen Gesellschaft für Volkskunde*, xxxvi (1936), 116-117.

<sup>8</sup> W. Henderson, *Folk-Lore of the Northern Counties of England and the Borders* (London, 1879), pp. 34-35; C. S. Burne, *Shropshire Folk-Lore* (London, 1883), p. 289.

<sup>9</sup> Wimberly, *op. cit.*, p. 241.

In Fife, the ghost of a lady was styled 'Green Jean' because it always appeared in a 'long gown of green.' 'Death is greener than grass,' says Captain Wedderburn (46 B 17), in answer to one of his lady's riddles.<sup>1</sup> The ancient ring game of Green Grass has been shown by Lady Gomme to have been originally a child's dramatic imitation of an old funeral ceremony.<sup>2</sup> Still more significant, throughout the Middle Ages, the Devil, this Christian symbol and counterpart of Death, wears a green coat.<sup>3</sup> It is impossible, without greatly exceeding the space allotted to us, to multiply the examples and to enter upon the interesting question of the origin of this somewhat strange color symbolism.<sup>4</sup> Suffice it to say that the green color of the Challenger in the ME poem, so far from contradicting the results arrived at above, most strikingly confirms them: His green color, quite as much as his dark and grim appearance in the older texts, is indicative of his true nature. There is therefore no reason to presume that this feature is a late invention.

Let us now pass from the looks and appearance of the uncanny challenger to the structure of the plot, for further light on the subject under discussion. Mr Kittredge has given a number of cogent illustrations of the custom of duelling by alternation, the challenger first submitting to the assault of the challenged and the latter subsequently receiving an equal number of blows from the challenger, a custom found in many primitive societies.<sup>5</sup> The duel may take place at the abode of the challenged (as in the Irish text) or in that of the challenger (as in the French texts). The ME poem, which represents the Challenger seeking Gawain at Arthur's court and Gawain subsequently visiting the magician at the latter's abode, there to receive the return blow, is, in the words of Miss Weston,<sup>6</sup> an ingenious combination of the two forms, indeed the only extant version which does attempt to combine them. What should be pointed out is that the latter arrangement recurs in a wide-spread mediaeval folk-tale type best known from the story of Don Juan.<sup>7</sup>

In this story the hero receives at his home a ghost (whom he has blasphemously invited) and offers him hospitality. In return, he is obliged to accept the ghost's invitation at a fixed term. Nothing daunted (though more usually with fear and trembling), he betakes himself to the ghost's dwelling, from which as a rule he is never allowed to depart.

The demon (for such an one he clearly is), who thus invites the hero to his sinister dwelling, is sometimes a dead ancestor of that hero, sometimes (as in the Spanish plays and their derivatives), a victim slain by him in a duel. He fre-

<sup>1</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 242.

<sup>2</sup> Lady Alice B. Gomme, *The Traditional Games of England, Scotland, and Ireland* (London, 1894-1898), I, 169.

<sup>3</sup> W. Aichele, *Zigeunermärchen* (Jena, 1926), p. 326; Bolte-Polívka, *Märchen-Anmerkungen*, II (1915), p. 435.

<sup>4</sup> The true explanation is probably to be sought in the green color assumed by corpses under certain conditions. This would also explain the green color of Osiris in Egyptian paintings: Osiris is the 'dead' god *par excellence*. <sup>5</sup> *Op. cit.*, pp. 218 *sqq.*

<sup>6</sup> Jessie L. Weston, *The Legend of Sir Gawain* (London, 1897), p. 99.

<sup>7</sup> For a full bibliography cp. Stith Thompson, *Motif-Index*, I, 381, type C 13.



quently is represented as a man of gigantic stature;<sup>1</sup> but he usually appears as a skeleton. The story normally has a tragic ending, though occasionally the hero escapes with his life, having promised to lead henceforth a more edifying life.<sup>2</sup> It is perhaps worth noting that the time of the action is sometimes New Year's Day.<sup>3</sup> Still more significant is the fact that in a Breton variant the gruesome guest is Death (Ankou) in person,<sup>4</sup> while the abode of the specter, usually the cemetery, sometimes the vault of an old chapel,<sup>5</sup> corresponds to the Green Chapel of the English poem, being simply a modified form of the fairy hill or elfin knoll, the abode of the dead ancestors.<sup>6</sup>

It is not claimed, of course, that this story type has helped to shape the plot of the *Green Knight*; we merely wish to point out the essential identity of the two plots. True enough, in the story of Don Juan the challenger is the mortal, a peculiarity explained by the fact that in this story type the sympathies of the hearers are clearly with the offended ghost, *not* with the hero, whose discomfiture thus appears as the just punishment of his blasphemy. At the same time, this identity of the story structure goes far to favor the view that the Green Knight is much the same sort of being as the ghostly protagonist of the Don Juan legend.

The partisans of the ritualistic theory have drawn far-reaching conclusions from the time of the action: New Year's Day in the ME poem, Pentecost in the *Livre de Caradoc*. It is, however, perfectly clear that the latter statement does not warrant any conclusion whatever, since the feast of the Pentecost is, in all Arthurian romances, the stereotyped time for adventures to happen. The Christmas season is more significant, that festival being, all over Europe and in the Near East, an ancient feast of the dead.<sup>7</sup> It is quite likely that in the lost Irish archetype the time of the action was All Hollowe'en, the Old Celtic New Year's Eve and at the same time a feast of the dead (of which the mediaeval and modern All Souls is merely the Christian successor). On that night the fairy hills and elves' knolls stood open, and the dead walked abroad, as indeed they still do in Ireland and Brittany.

There is, lastly, the holly bough borne by the Green Knight and which, being

<sup>1</sup> J. Klapper, *Mitteilungen der Schlesischen Gesellschaft für Volkskunde*, XIII-XIV (1911), 202.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 205 sqq.; 210; 213; 215 sq.

<sup>3</sup> E. S. Hartland, *The Science of Fairy-Tales* (London, 1891), pp. 167 sq.

<sup>4</sup> Le Braz, *op. cit.*, I, 123 sqq.

<sup>5</sup> J. H. Carnoy, *Littérature orale de la Picardie* (Paris, 1883), pp. 120 sqq.; E. Tegethoff, *Französische Volksmärchen* (Jena, 1923), I, 13 sqq.; 324.

<sup>6</sup> That this Green Chapel is nothing but a modified form of the fairy hill was pointed out by J. R. Hulbert, *Modern Philology*, XIII, 690-691.

<sup>7</sup> Paul Sébillot, *Le Folk-Lore de France*, I (1904), p. 157; J. V. Grohmann, *Apollo Smintheus und die Bedeutung der Mäuse in der Mythologie der Indogermanen* (Prag, 1862), pp. 26-27; 33; Kreutzwald-Löwe, *Ehstnische Märchen* (Halle, 1869), p. 230; A. Strauss, *Bulgarische Volksdichtungen* (Wien-Leipzig, 1895), p. 31; H. Usener, *Kleine Schriften*, IV (1914), 427; Chambers, *op. cit.*, I, 265; J. Klapper, *Schlesische Volkskunde auf kulturgeschichtlicher Grundlage* (Breslau, 1925), p. 283; T. Gwynn Jones, *Welsh Folklore and Folk-Custom* (London, 1930), p. 151; *Zeitschrift d. Vereins f. Volkskunde*, XXXVII-XXXVIII (1927-1928), 221; *Folk-Lore*, XXXIX (1928), 227; C. M. Doughty, *Travels in Arabia Deserta* (London, 1926), I, 136-137; Jan de Vries, *Contributions to the Study of Othin, especially in His Relation to Agricultural Practices in Modern Popular Lore* (Helsinki, 1931), p. 21 (F. F. C., no. 94).

a member of the vegetable kingdom, has been cited as 'proving' the vegetable origin of its bearer. To be sure, the second of Dickens' Christmas ghosts is 'clothed in one simple green robe, or mantle, bordered with white fir . . . on its head it wore no other covering than a holly wreath, set here and there with shining icicles.' Yet no one has acclaimed him as yet as a 'vegetation demon'! Thus the most simple explanation of the holly bough of the Green Knight would be that, like Dickens' ghost, he keeps up with the season of the year. The most simple explanation is, however, not necessarily the true one. What is certain is that the plant has not been chosen at random; for the author expressly refers to it as the tree 'that is greatest in green when groves are bare.'

The holly (*Ilex aquifolium*) is one of the few evergreen shrubs of Northern Europe, a fact which naturally drew the attention of the folk to this plant, hence its quite considerable rôle in folk-lore, hence its many apotropaic characteristics.<sup>1</sup> In the British Isles and in Brittany it has always been closely associated with Christmas, was in fact, prior to the introduction of the Christmas tree from Germany (late in the reign of Queen Victoria), *the* Christmas plant. The chief reason for this was, obviously, the fact that it is one of the few evergreen trees of Northern Europe and, Christmas falling into the winter season, that the number of trees available was necessarily limited. There was, besides, an ancient association of evergreen trees with death, witness the yew trees in mediaeval and modern cemeteries and the cluster of elfin lore peculiar to this tree in mediaeval literature and modern folk-belief.<sup>2</sup> Much the same holds true for the holly. It is a well-known English superstition that holly carried into a house *before* Christmas betokens a death in the following year. Conversely, it must be taken down on or before Candlemas Eve, witness the verses of Herrick:

Down with the Holly and Ivy all  
Wherewith ye deck the Christmas hall;  
So that the superstitious find  
No one least branch there left behind;  
For look how many leaves there be  
Neglected there — maids 'tend to me —  
So many goblins ye shall see.

This is as much as to say that the ghosts of the dead, visiting their former home during Christmas tide, when the netherworld stood open, continued to stay in the house unless the holly was removed at the end of the term.

The holly closely resembles the Mediterranean holm-oak (*Quercus ilex*), an evergreen oak, a tree which there is reason to suppose the ancient Italians have considered in much the same light. Vergil places it at the very entrance to the netherworld; on it grows the famous 'golden bough,' which is the key required to penetrate to the shades below:

Inde ubi venere ad fauces graveolentis Averni  
tollunt se celeres, liquidumque per aera lapsae,

<sup>1</sup> E. Rolland, *Flore populaire*, ix (1912), 110; 264; R. Folkard, *Plant Lore, Legends, and Lyrics* (London, 1884), p. 377.

<sup>2</sup> Ovid, *Metam.*, iv, 432; F. Möwes, in *Globus*, lxii (1892), 91-92; 192; E. Lemke, *Zeitschrift des Vereins für Volkskunde*, xii (1902), pp. 25-38.

sedibus optatis, gemina super arbore sidunt,  
 discolor unde auri per ramos aura refulsit.  
 quale solet silvis brumali frigore viscum  
 fronde virere nova, quod non sua seminat arbos,  
 et croceo fetu teretis circumdare truncos:  
 talis erat species auri frondentis opaca  
 ilice, sic leni crepitabat brattea vento . . . <sup>1</sup>

At all events, there is sound reason to believe that in the Celtic lands the holly was closely associated with the powers of death, that it was a symbol of death, subsequently to develop into a symbol of the time of the year when the world of the dead stood open and when the poor souls were free to haunt their old abodes to warm themselves by the fire of the Yule log. The holly bough would thus seem to be a fitting emblem of the Lord of Hades and most appropriately placed in the hand of the grim executioner when he first entered the banqueting hall of a Samhain night according to the text of some ancient Irish saga now irretrievably lost.

The foregoing observations will have established, it is hoped, one essential fact: The mysterious Green Knight is none other than the Lord of Hades, who comes to challenge to a beheading game the heroes sitting around the fire, probably some All Hollowe'en night. His challenge is taken up by Gawain, the flower of knighthood, who thereby proves himself the equal of Herakles, who wrestled with Thanatos, of the Dioscures, who rescued their sister from the clutches of Aphidnos, 'the Pitiless,' of the youngest brother of Burd Ellen, who descended into the netherworld to redeem his sister fallen into the power of the 'King of Elfland,' of the bold Rama, who combated and slew the demon Ravana in the latter's sinister abode. All these stories, of essentially the same pattern,<sup>2</sup> have their basis and starting point in the simple psychological fact that to man there is nothing more terrible than Death and that it requires a knight *sans peur et sans reproche* to accept his grim challenge and to brave him. Our story brings out the additional truth that it is one thing to face Death on the battle field, in the company of brave men, with the hope of victory and the certainty of glory, but quite another to brave him alone in a mortuary chapel and under the axe of the executioner, when there is no chance of victory and every prospect of disgrace. Yet English history shows that the nobility of the Plantagenets, the Tudors, and the Stuarts knew also to face that less glorious end with equal equanimity and fortitude:

Cowards die many times before their deaths;  
 The valiant never taste of death but once.

WASHINGTON, D. C.

<sup>1</sup> Verg. *Aen.*, vi, 201 sqq.

<sup>2</sup> Cp. on this subject: *Rheinisches Museum f. Philologie*, LXXX (1931), 113-128; *Revue Celtique*, XLVIII (1931), 94-123.